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ABSTRACT

A study of the relationship of request comprehension with context and experience with the language is reported. Sixty-two East Asian non-native English speaking students from China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan were presented with seemingly spontaneous indirect requests during a taped interview. Their ability to respond appropriately to the requests was compared with their exposure to English and their listening comprehension as displayed in their responses to questions. Results indicate that the ability to understand requests correlates with listening ability and length of stay in English-speaking countries, but not with exposure to English. Further research could focus on other speech act types and also on methodology in teaching English as a second language. It should attempt to answer questions dealing with how students of English might be taught use and understand functions in English. (Author/MSE)

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Comprehension of Indirect Requests in English by East Asian Non-Native Speakers

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ABSTRACT

The traditional focus of linguistics has been the study of isolated phonemes, morphemes, words, and sentences. Most linguists agree now, however, that grammatical knowledge is only one factor in comprehension. Others include the setting, background knowledge, and sociocultural assumptions. Linguistic pragmatics is the study of the relation between language and context basic to an account of language understanding. Pragmatics is therefore concerned with comprehension of meaning not included in the grammatical form of an utterance.

In second and foreign language education, the traditional focus is on vocabulary and syntax. Second and foreign language teachers and researchers have recently become interested in context's contribution to meaning.

In this study, East Asian participants were presented with seemingly spontaneous indirect requests during an interview. Their ability to respond appropriately to the requests was compared with their exposure to English and listening comprehension ability displayed in their responses to questions. Ability to understand requests was correlated with listening ability and length of stay in English-speaking countries but not exposure to English. Suggestions for future research were discussed.

Comprehension Indirect Requests in English by East Asian Non-Native Speakers

The traditional focus of linguistics has been the study of isolated phonemes, morphemes, words, and sentences. Most linguists agree now, however, that grammatical knowledge is only one of several factors of the comprehension process. Other factors include the physical setting, participants' background knowledge, and sociocultural assumptions (Gumperz, 1977).

As Grice (1957) and Searle (1971) pointed out, what is meant by a particular sentence (sentence meaning) is not necessarily what a speaker means by that sentence when it is spoken in a particular context (speaker meaning). An utterance may include meaning that is not accounted for by the grammatical structure. For example, a sergeant who asks a private, "Do you see that cigarette butt there, soldier?" wants the cigarette butt picked up, not an answer to that explicit question. The soldier who answered the question without following the implied order to pick up the cigarette butt would be considered insolent, even though nothing in the literal meaning of the question includes an order to pick up the cigarette butt. The speaker meaning is something more than the sentence meaning.

In this paper, I will begin by defining the study of linguistic pragmatics and then discuss speech act theory and how it applies to learners of English. In this study, I will look at ability to understand requests in context and various correlates.

Definition of Linguistic Pragmatics

The field of linguistic pragmatics has been defined in a wide variety of ways (Levinson, 1983). For the purpose of this paper, the definition I will use will be, "the study of the relations between language and context that are basic to an account of language understanding" (Levinson, 1983). This definition implies that comprehending an utterance involves much more than understanding the words and syntactic structures. Pragmatics is therefore concerned with comprehension of meaning not included in the grammatical form of an utterance.

Speech Act Theory

One of the major theories in the field of linguistic pragmatics is speech act theory (Searle, 1979). In speech act theory, a distinction is made between locutionary and illocutionary acts (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1979). A locutionary act is what is said; an illocutionary act is what is meant. This is similar to the distinction between

sentence meaning and speaker meaning.

Another distinction made by speech act theorists is between direct and indirect speech acts. A direct speech act is an act in which the locutionary force and the illocutionary force are the same. An indirect speech act is one in which the illocutionary force is different from the locutionary force. "Please close the door," would be a direct speech act, since the locutionary force and the illocutionary force are the same. "Can you close the door," used as a request, would be an indirect speech act. The locutionary force is a question about the hearer's ability to close the door; the illocutionary force is a request to close the door.

Locutionary and Illocutionary Force: An Example. In comprehension, H must decide whether the illocutionary force of utterance is the same as the locutionary force, and if they are different, what the illocutionary force is. To illustrate this, Searle (1975: 33) used the following example:

Student A: Let's go to the movies tonight.
Student B: I have to study for an exam.

Student A's utterance is a proposal in which the locutionary force and illocutionary force are the same (direct speech act), by virtue of the use the word Let's in particular. That is, in most sentences (e.g., "Let's

eat pizza," "Let's go ice skating"), "let's" indicates a proposal. In contrast, Student B's utterance would be taken as a refusal, even though there is nothing in the locutionary force of "I have to..." that indicates a refusal in the sense that "Let's..." indicates a proposal.

Searle (1979: 34-35) described the steps that Student A would have to go through--unconsciously--to derive the illocution of the utterance from the locution. Since A's statement was a proposal, A would assume that B's response, to be relevant, must be one of acceptance, rejection, counterproposal, further discussion, etc. However, B's utterance, taken literally, was not one of these and therefore was not relevant. Therefore, A would assume that B must have meant more than what he/she said, and the illocutionary meaning must be different from the locutionary meaning. B knows that studying for an exam and going to a movie both take a large amount of time relative to a single evening, so B probably cannot do both in one evening. Since acceptance of a proposal is predicated on ability to perform the act, and since B has said something that indicates that he cannot perform the act, the illocutionary meaning of the utterance is probably to reject the proposal. (Note that the conclusion is probabilistic; Student B may have gone on to

say that he will study for the exam after the movie.)

As Searle also points out, some indirect speech acts have become conventionalized. For example, "Can you open the window?" has become a conventionalized request, even though there is nothing in the grammar of the sentence that makes it a request. It is possible to imagine a situation where "Can you open the window?" would be intended as a suggestion or a question about H's ability, but in the absence of strong clues to the contrary, it would likely be interpreted as a request (Raskin, 1986). The illocutionary force of even conventionalized requests would, according to Searle, be determined by H, using a series of unconscious inferences similar to the ones that Searle detailed for the reply to the proposal about going out to the movies.

Other theorists have posited that, at least for conventionalized utterances, it is not necessary to go through these steps to arrive at the illocutionary force of the utterance (Ervin-Tripp, 1976). Ervin-Tripp maintained that for familiar, conventionalized forms, the conventionalized meaning is assumed, unless it does not fit the context. If the conventionalized meaning does not fit the context, H resorts to the inferential process. She supported this argument with evidence of the speed

with which H is able to interpret conventionalized forms. She maintained that H is able to interpret the illocutionary force of a conventionalized speech act because the inference process is not necessary. However, she does not offer any research to support this point.

Ervin-Tripp also argued that responses to the locutionary force rather than the illocutionary force of an utterance are humorous, because they are unexpected, that is, they had not previously occurred to the listener. For example: [child to mother]

"Do you know where Daddy hid the candy?"
"No."

Ervin-Tripp maintained that replies like this would not be humorous if they were expected. Since the inferential process that Searle described involves the literal meaning of the utterance, a literal reply would not be humorous, because that interpretation would already have occurred to the listener.

Pragmatics and the Second Language Learner

It is widely recognized that learning a second language involves much more than being able to understand the sounds, grammar and vocabulary of the second language (Fraser, 1978). It also involves the ability to comprehend and use language in real communication situations. However, while there has been both theorizing

and research on how native speakers comprehend indirect speech acts, there has been very little of either on how non-native speakers comprehend indirect speech acts in their second language (Kasper, 1984; Conrad, 1984).

Illocutionary force sometimes seem so obvious to native speakers of a language that the idea of interpreting them literally or not understanding them may seem unlikely. However, non-native speakers do have difficulty with them. For example, a Chinese dinner guest, when asked if she could reach the salt, replied, "Yes, my arms are long" (personal communication, J. DeCarrico, July, 1984).

Kasper (1984) found that nonnative speakers in their second language tended to try to interpret the meanings of speech acts without using the context, which would have helped in interpretation of illocutionary force. Nonnative speakers therefore tended to depend on the sentence meaning and seemed to have difficulty making inferences about the speaker meaning. Kasper speculated that at least part of the reason is that traditional methods of language teaching (those that focus on linguistic forms rather than communicative functions) deal mainly with individual sentences, often even at the advanced level.

Faerch and Kasper (1985) recommended that second language education include the pragmatic component of communicative competence as a teaching goal. They also recommend facilitating the activation of native language pragmatic knowledge to help second language speakers.

Research Questions

In this study, I would like to look at the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between comprehension of indirect requests and global comprehension of English?
2. What factors influence proficiency in comprehension of indirect requests--length of time in an English-speaking country? Interactional exposure to English? Mediated exposure to English? Total exposure to English? Living with an English speaking family?
3. Are non-native speakers able to benefit from the context in comprehension of conventionalized requests?

Chapter II

Methods

Overview

In this study, I looked at influences on the development of ability of East Asian non-native English speakers to understand indirect requests. I also looked at the relationship between the ability to understand indirect requests and the ability to understand information-gathering questions in general.

Participants were interviewed about the amount of exposure that they had to English, including the amount of time spent in class, the amount of time spent speaking with native English speakers, and the amount of time spent watching television. During the course of the interview, five ostensibly spontaneous requests are made of the interviewee, and the interviewee's ability to comprehend the requests is assessed.

Participants

Participants were sixty-two students from China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. (The tape of the interview with one participant was inaudible, and this participant was eliminated from the analyses.) They were students either in the English Language Center (ELC) at Michigan State University or the Haslett Adult Education Program. The

students from the ELC were either preparing to enter regular university classes or had begun to take university classes in addition to the English language classes. The Haslett students were mostly wives of students. A few were university students or working people.

Participants from China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan were used because of the similarities in their educational backgrounds. In all four countries, English education lasts from five to eight years and emphasizes the grammar-translation method. Also, in their own countries, participants would have had little opportunity to interact with native English speakers and little other exposure to native English, e.g., through the media or through interaction with native speakers. Last, all three languages are very different from English, so the native languages would be of little help in comprehending English.

Procedure and Stimulus Materials

Participants were recruited by asking them whether they would be willing be interviewed for about five minutes. They were informed that the interview would cover their experiences studying English and their experiences in the United States.

Participants were interviewed individually by a

confederate. (As much as possible, male interviewees were interviewed by a male interviewer, and female interviewees by a female interviewer. However, scheduling did not always allow this.) The interviewer's questions were scripted. (Interviewers memorized the questions and did not use the script.) They included questions about what country the interviewee came from and how much time he/she spent in class, talking with Americans, and watching television. Interviewees were also questioned about whether they had visited other English speaking countries or lived with an English speaking family. (For the text of the interview, see Appendix A.)

At five points during the interview, the interviewer made indirect requests, the meaning of which would be supported by the context. At the beginning of the interview, the interviewer's chair and the interviewee's chair were set too far apart for normal conversation, and the interviewer was closer to the tape recorder. Before beginning the interview, the interviewer gestured to a point closer to his/her own chair and said, "Why don't you move your chair closer?" After asking for the interviewee's name, the interviewer said, "Would you spell that for me?" About halfway through the questions in the interview, another confederate interrupted and said, "I

need to see you when you're finished," and left the door open. The interviewer then said, "Would you mind closing that door?" Later in the interview, the interviewer pretended to make an error in writing down an answer, tried to erase the error, and found that there was no eraser on the pencil. Looking around for an eraser, he/she finds one on a table near the interviewee and says, "Could I ask you to give me that eraser?" At the end of the interview, the interviewer looks at his/her wrist and says, "I forgot my watch. Do you know what time it is?"

The interview was pretested with two Japanese students. Slight adjustments in the procedure and interview content were made as a result.

Measurement

Comprehension of Indirect Requests. For the each indirect request, interviewees were rated on a scale from 0 to 4. If the interviewee begins to respond to the request within two seconds, the interviewee scores 4. If the interviewee begins to respond appropriately to the request within three or four seconds, he/she scores 3. If the interviewee requests clarification, he/she scores 2. If the interviewee does not respond within four seconds, the interviewer repeats the request. If the interviewee responds appropriately, he/she scores 1. If not, he/she

scores 0. To arrive at a score for ability to comprehend indirect requests, the scores for the five requests are summed and divided by five.

Exposure to English. Answers to questions about amount of time spent in class, watching television, going to movies, and interacting with Americans were converted into hours per week. The number of hours per week are summed for a total exposure score.

Ratings of Listening Comprehension. Coders listened to tapes of the interviews and rated the listening comprehension ability of the interviewee according to a six point scale from 5 (Comprehension ability as good as a native English speaker) to 0 (Does not understand some questions. Responds inappropriately or not at all to several questions.) (See Appendix B for the full text of the coding instructions).

It was emphasized to coders not to pay attention to the interviewee's ability to understand requests, only information-gathering questions. Also, they were instructed not to pay attention to the interviewee's pronunciation or grammatical proficiency or any other facet of production, only listening comprehension.

Coders were instructed to base their ratings of listening comprehension on the interviewees' ability to

answer questions appropriately and with little pause between the question and the answer, to comprehend speech at a normal rate, and to understand questions without repetition or simplifications. (The rate of speech for the interviewer was taken as an indication of listening comprehension, since the native speakers were instructed not to adjust their rate of speaking unless the interviewee demonstrated a lack of comprehension.) Last, coders were instructed to listen to the entire interview before making a rating, so that problems in comprehension at the beginning of the tape would not be weighed more heavily than they should have been.

Chapter III

Results

Consistency Checks

Gender of Interviewer by Gender of Participant. Originally, it was intended that the female interviewer would interview female participants and the male interviewer would interview male participants. However, because the scheduling of the interviews did not always allow this, it was necessary to check to see whether the interviewees paired with an opposite sex interviewer responded differently than those paired with a same sex interviewer. Gender of the interviewer and of the participant were used as independent variables and total score for comprehending requests as the dependent variable in a 2 x 2 analysis of variance. No significant main or interaction effects were found.

Comparison of the Programs. Comparisons were made among students from the two programs to see whether they could be combined for the purpose of analysis. Program and listening comprehension (using a median split) were used as independent variables in a 2 x 2 ANOVA with comprehension of requests as the dependent variable. A main effect was found for listening comprehension ($df = 1,58$; $F = 6.99$; $p < .05$), but there was no main effect for

the program (df = 1,58; F = 2.187; p > .05) and no interaction effect (df = 1,58; F = 1.55; p > .05).

Comparisons of Male and Female Interviewees. Comparisons were also made between male and female interviewees. An ANOVA using gender and listening comprehension as independent variables and comprehension of requests as a dependent variable showed a main effect for listening comprehension, but there was no main effect for gender and no interaction effect.

Comparisons among Countries. An ANOVA using country and listening comprehension (with a median split) as independent variables and comprehension of requests as the dependent variable indicated a main effect for listening comprehension (df = 1,54; F = 10.54; p < .05) but no main effect for country (df = 3,54; F = 2.09; p > .05) and no interaction effect (df = 3,54; F = 1.09; p > .05).

Reliabilities

Chronbach's alpha for ratings of listening comprehension was .93 and for comprehension of requests was .68. Chronbach's alpha was not calculated for exposure to English, because the factors that made up total exposure to English (sum of the hours per week spent in class, watching television, talking with Americans, and watching movies) would not necessarily be correlated. For

example, a person who watches television a lot will not necessarily talk with Americans a lot. If fact, it might be argued that the more time one spends with one source of exposure to English, the less time he/she has available for other sources of exposure to English.

Other variables used single measures and therefore reliabilities could not be estimated.

Correlations among Variables

Cumulated Exposure. Pearson correlations among score for requests, listening comprehension ratings, exposure to English per week, and length of time spent in English-speaking countries, with corrections for attenuation of correlations with comprehension of requests and listening comprehension, appear in Table 1.

	Request	Listening Comprehension	Length
Exposure	.27 * (.33)*	.36 * (.37)*	.05
Request		.67 * (.84)*	.20 (.21)
Listening Comprehension			.05 (.06)

Table 1--Pearson correlations among variables
( ) = corrected for attenuation
* = $p < .05$
Request = comprehension of requests
Listening Comprehension = ratings of listening comprehension
Length = number of months in English-speaking countries
Exposure = number of hours of exposure to English per week

Significant correlations were found between exposure and comprehension of requests, listening comprehension and exposure, and listening comprehension and comprehension of requests. However, second order partial correlations, which appear in Table 2, indicate that the correlation between exposure to English and comprehension of requests is spurious, caused by the correlation both have with listening comprehension. Listening comprehension and length of stay in English-speaking countries had significant second order partial correlations with comprehension of requests.

	Exposure	Listening Comprehension	Length
Request	-.09	.82*	.29*

Table 2--Second order partial correlations with comprehension of requests
* = $p < .05$

The partial correlation between listening comprehension and exposure with length of time in English-speaking countries held constant was .48 ($p < .05$). The partial correlation between listening comprehension and length of time in English-speaking countries with exposure to English held constant was -.20 ($p > .05$). Correlations between comprehension of requests and other variables appear in Table 3. The amount of time spent in class and the amount of time spent talking with Americans are both positively correlated with listening comprehension. Amount of time spent in class was negatively correlated with length of time spent in English-speaking countries. Amount of time spent talking with Americans and seeing movies were both positively correlated with amount of time spent in class, and amount of time spent seeing movies was also positively correlated with amount of time spent talking with Americans.

	List. Comp.	Length	Class	Talk with Am.	TV	Radio	Movies
Request	.67 * (.84)*	.14 (.17)	.19 (.23)	.19 (.23)	.12 (.14)	.11 (.13)	-.04 (-.05)
List. Comp.		-.05 (-.05)	.42 * (.44)*	.30 * (.31)*	.10 (.10)	-.01 (-.01)	.10 (.10)
Length			-.22*	.07	.15	.01	-.19
Class				.42*	-.20	-.01	.24*
Talk with Am.					-.07	.19	.29*
TV						-.11	-.10
Radio							-.13

Table 3--Pearson correlations among variables
( ) = corrected for attenuation
* = $p < .05$

Fifth order partial correlations with comprehension of requests appear in Table 4. Only listening comprehension is significantly correlated with comprehension of requests.

	Length	Radio	TV	Talk with Am.	Movies	List. Comp.
Request	.22	.16	.04	-.07	-.06	.84*

Table 4--Fifth order partial correlations with scores on five requests

Fifth order partial correlations with ratings of listening comprehension appear in Table 5. The amount of

time spent talking with Americans is significantly correlated with listening comprehension.

	Length	Radio	TV	Talk with Am.	Movies	Class
Listening Comprehension	-.10	-.06	.13	.33*	-.01	.35*

Table 5--Fifth order partial correlations with ratings of listening comprehension

Fifth order partial correlations were calculated between length of time in English-speaking countries and six other variables: listening comprehension and time spent watching television, listening to the radio, attending class, going to movies, and talking with Americans. Of these six partial correlations, only amount of time spent talking with Americans had a significant correlation with length of time in English-speaking countries ($r = .27$; $p < .05$).

Staying with English-Speaking Families. An ANOVA using listening comprehension and living with an English-speaking family as independent variables and listening comprehension and ability to comprehend requests as dependent variables was performed. Living with an English speaking family did not have a significant effect on either ability to comprehend requests or on general listening comprehension. However, only eleven of the

subjects had had this experience, and most of these had lived with English-speaking families for less than a week. This makes it difficult to assess of the effects of the intense exposure to English that living with an English-speaking family would allow.

Chapter IV

Discussion

Consistency Checks

Interviewees from Different Programs. In order to find a sufficient number of participants, it was necessary to use students in two different language programs. The programs were different in that the university's English Language Center program emphasizes preparation for academic work, while the Haslett Adult Education Program is more general.

An ANOVA indicated that the differences in comprehension of requests were explained by differences in proficiency in listening comprehension, not by the program that participants attended. It is possible to combine students from the two different programs.

Gender of Interviewee. An ANOVA showed no differences in comprehension of requests based on gender of the interviewee or on opposite sex pairings of interviewer and interviewee. There do not appear to be any problems in combining male and female interviewees or using opposite sex pairings between interviewer and interviewee.

Nationality of Interviewee. There were no differences among interviewees from different countries in

their ability to comprehend requests, when listening comprehension was taking into account. It is possible to combine participants from these four countries.

Reliabilities

Listening Comprehension. Ratings of listening comprehension were highly reliable, with an alpha of .93. (In addition, correlations among raters averaged .80.)

Comprehension of Requests. Alpha for the five requests was .68, which appears to be moderately reliable, especially for a five-item measure. However, this apparent reliability was caused, in part, by a ceiling effect, which was caused by the fact that the requests were rather easy. (Forty percent of the interviewees had perfect scores for comprehension of requests.) The item that appeared to be least reliable was the first one (Could I ask you to move your chair closer.) The problem with this may have been caused in part by the fact that the context was somewhat less clear than for other questions. Chairs were set up uncomfortably far apart for normal conversation, and the interviewee was much further away from the tape recorder than the interviewer. However, interviewees may have assumed that the chairs were already the way that the interviewer wanted them, and therefore not anticipated from the context that the chairs

should be closer together.

In other questions, interviewees probably got too much information from the context or depended heavily on past experience. For example, some respondents began to spell their names before the interviewer could ask for the name, probably because they were accustomed to being asked to spell their names when someone was writing their names down. Also, the interviewers reported that when they tried to erase an error and found that they didn't have an eraser on the pencil, some interviewees were already looking around for an eraser before they could make the request. These items may have been too easy, because they were so obvious from the context that the spoken request was almost unnecessary.

Single-Item Measures. Length of stay in the US, exposure to English from different sources, etc., were all measured with single items. Most of these are probably reported fairly accurately, e.g., it is likely that interviewees could accurately report the length of their stay in the US and even how many movies they saw, on the average, per week. However, such questions as the average amount of television watched per day or the average amount of time spent speaking with native English speakers might be more difficult to estimate.

Correlations among Variables

Correlations with Comprehension of Requests.

Correlations among comprehension of requests, exposure to English, ratings of listening comprehension, and length of stay in English-speaking counties indicated that there is a strong correlation between listening comprehension and comprehension of requests. Sixty-four percent of the variance in comprehension of requests was explained by proficiency in listening comprehension.

This is an interesting finding in relation to the debate about whether hearers go through the process that Searle (1979) described when attempting to comprehend the illocutionary force of speech acts when conventionalized forms are used. It appears that, at least for second language learners, comprehension of conventionalized indirect request forms is related to proficiency in listening comprehension, rather than a process of inference. It is not clear whether the conventionalized request form helps them in comprehension. They may use the request form (e.g., Could I ask you to...) to recognize that there is a request and then listen to find out what the request is. It is also possible that they ignore the request form and listen to the request itself (e.g., ...close the door.) When questioned about her

listening comprehension, one of the pretest subjects said that she always listens for key words when trying to understand English.

Length of time in English-speaking countries was correlated with comprehension of requests, though there was no significant correlation with exposure. This was an interesting and surprising finding. One explanation might be that, over time, nonnative English speakers in an English-speaking country absorb conventionalized forms for various functions, even with relatively little daily exposure to English. Knowledge of conventionalized forms helps them comprehend requests. Interestingly, length of time spent in English-speaking countries is not similarly correlated with listening comprehension.

Correlations with Listening Comprehension. Students with greater exposure to English were rated better in listening comprehension, according to the partial correlations. Based on this evidence, there is no way to make causal statements here. Either nonnative speakers who have good listening proficiency seek out expose to English more or being exposed to English more improves listening comprehension. I would speculate that there is a reciprocal relationship. As exposure increases, listening comprehension improves; as listening

comprehension improves, nonnative speakers seek out exposure to English.

Correlations with Types of Exposure to English. Listening comprehension was significantly correlated with the amount of time spent talking with Americans. Again, no causal statements can be made about this relationship based on this evidence. However, it may be again that the two variables have a reciprocal relationship. As listening comprehension improves, nonnative speakers feel more confident in interacting with Americans and even seek them out; as they have more interaction with native speakers, their comprehension improves and they feel more and more confident about interacting with native speakers.

However, this relationship does not seem to hold for mediated exposure to English. Listening comprehension is not significantly correlated with either television viewing or movie attendance. Possibly the reason for this is that, while trying to interact with a native English speaker when one does not comprehend English well is threatening, watching television or a movie does not involve the same kind of threat. Not understanding what another person says, and therefore not being able to respond appropriately, can be embarrassing. Not being able to understand mediated English, in one's

own home or in a movie theater, is not necessarily embarrassing.

Exposure and Length. One assumption of these analyses is that exposure to English is fairly consistent over time. Results indicated that only amount of time spent talking with Americans was correlated with the amount of time spent in English speaking countries. While this does not necessarily show that exposure to English is static for individuals, it does indicate that, for the group as a whole, only interaction with Americans was influenced by amount of time spent in English-speaking countries.

Limitations of the Study

One major limitation of this study is that it only applies to nonnative English speakers from China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. Nonnative speakers from other countries, where, for example, the native language is related to English, or where English used more in every day life, or where the educational system emphasized spoken English, might produce different results.

Another limitation is that all interviewees were students receiving formal instruction in English language. This affects the sample in at least two ways. First, the

range of listening comprehension proficiency was restricted on both ends. On one end of the proficiency scale, participants who had completed their formal training in English language, or who were already proficient in English when they arrived in the US, were excluded. On the other end of the scale, participants who had never taken English classes and as a result have very low proficiency in English were excluded. Second, the sample only included nonnative speakers who, for whatever reason, are interested in improving their English proficiency. Students at the ELC want to improve their proficiency in order to enter the university and do better in their university classes. They may also want to be able to communicate with Americans. Haslett students may also be studying English to be able to communicate with Americans and/or just because they are interested in English. Nonnative speakers who were not interested in improving their English would be excluded from the sample.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study dealt with only one speech act, requests. Future studies can be done on other speech acts. Also, the request forms used in this study were all conventional. Useful and interesting studies might be done using forms of requests and other speech acts that

have not become conventionalized. Using less conventional forms would give more of an idea of nonnative English speakers' ability to draw inferences in English. It would also be interesting to study the relationship between understanding conventionalized forms in isolation and understanding them in context. If nonnative speakers could understand requests both in isolation and in context, this would imply that nonnative speakers make use of the request form markers in comprehension. If, on the other hand, they could understand requests in context but not out of context, this would indicate that they depend heavily on the context in comprehension of requests.

Another area of research would involve methodology in teaching English as a second language. A number of vital questions deal with how students of English might best be taught use and understand functions in English. In my experience, most functional approaches teach conventionalized forms. They do not teach students to deal with inference when unconventional forms are used. Do nonnative speakers, if put in an English-speaking environment, learn to make the necessary inferences themselves? Will classroom instruction help them learn to draw these inferences? If this can be taught in the

classroom, what methods of instruction would be most effective? Answers to these and other questions would improve the ability of teachers to help students improve their communication in English as a second language.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW SCRIPT

Hi, my name is _____. Please sit down.

I'm going to ask you a few questions about your country and your experiences in the United States.

With a gesture indicating a spot on the floor closer to his/her own chair) Why don't you move your chair closer? (If the participant does not respond appropriately, the interviewer repeats the request; if the participant still does not respond, the interviewer goes on to the first question.

* First of all, what is your name?

(Interviewer poises pencil above paper and hesitates; looks back up at participant) Would you spell that for me?
(If the participant does not respond appropriately, the interviewer repeats the request; if the interviewee does not respond appropriately, the interviewer writes down the name as best he/she can.)

* Where are you from?

Where in (China/Japan/Korea/Taiwan) are you from?

What is that part of (China/Japan/Korea/Taiwan) famous for?

* How long have you been in the United States?

* What have you been doing since you've been here in the United States?

** How many hours a week do you spend in classes?

* How many of these are ELC classes?

(A confederate interrupts and asks to speak with the interviewer when he/she is finished.)
(glancing at the open door) Would you mind closing that door?
(If the participant does not respond appropriately to the request, the interviewer will repeat it once. If the participant still does not respond appropriately, the interviewer will close the door.)

* How many American or Canadian friends do you have?

** On the average, how much time do you spend talking with Americans each day?

* Have you ever stayed with an American family? If so, for how long?

(Interviewer pretends to make a mistake in filling out the response form; pointing with the pencil at eraser placed on table near the participant)
Could I ask you to give me that eraser?
(If the participant does not respond appropriately to the re quest, the interviewer will repeat it once. If the participant still does not respond appropriately, the interviewer will get the eraser.)
(Interviewer erases a response and writes something else.)

** How much time do you spend watching television each day?

What kind of programs do you watch?

** How often do you go to movies?

What kinds of movies do you like?

** How many hours do you spend listening to the radio each day?

What do you listen to on the radio?

* Have you ever been to any other English-speaking country? If so, what country? For how long?

** How long did you spend each day talking to the people there in English?

* Did you stay with an English-speaking family there? If so, for how long?

(Interviewer glances at his/her own wrist, which does not have a watch on it.) I forgot my watch. Do you know what time it is? (If the participant does not respond appropriately, the interviewer repeats the request once. If the participant does not respond appropriately, the interviewer thanks the participant for the information and closes the interview.)

* necessary to get an answer
** necessary to get an answer that can be converted to hours/week

APPENDIX B

CODING SCHEME

Your task is to determine the non-native English speaker's ability to comprehend spoken English questions. Do not pay attention to grammatical errors, pronunciation, or any other facet of production, except as they indicate the subject's comprehension of English (e.g., if the subject's answer indicates that he/she did not understand the meaning of the question). Also, only pay attention to the answers to information-gathering questions. Do not pay attention to responses to requests.

5 Seems to understand everything at native English rate of delivery. Little or no pause between question and answer. Understands and responds appropriately to all questions. Comprehension ability as good as a native English speaker.

4 Understands nearly everything spoken at native English rate or nearly native English rate, but may pause occasionally between question and answer, indicating that a little effort is necessary to comprehend the meaning of the question. Did not require repetition more than twice.

3 Understands much of what is said at slower than normal delivery and with some repetitions and simplification. Noticeable pauses between questions and answers, indicating some effort necessary to comprehend meaning of questions. May respond inappropriately to one or two questions.

2 Understands with difficulty most of what is said at slower than native English rate. Requires repetition and simplification for many questions. May initially respond inappropriately to several questions.

1 Understood what was said only with great difficulty. Requires many repetitions and simplifications. Was not able to respond appropriately to some questions.

0 Does not understand some questions. Responds inappropriately or not at all to several questions.